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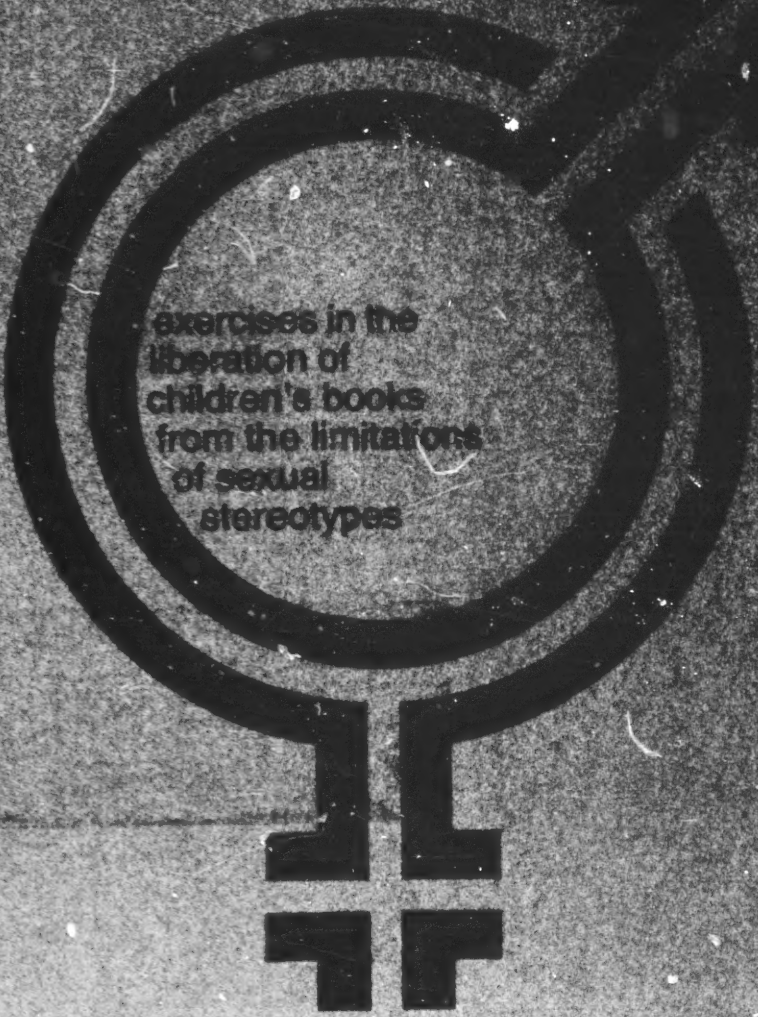
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this introductory unit is to examine the patterns of sexual stereotyping in children's books and the ways in which they reinforce inequality, to consider possible benefits and anticipate problems of change, and to examine the possiblility of an alternative children's literature supportive of sexual equality in education. The book proposes setting up a workshop and examining educational opportunities for boys and girls; using suggested techniques for analyzing traditional sex-role stereotyping in children's picture books; asking participants to search for examples of roles and images contrary to the usual stereotypes; discussing the fact that more female role models are needed in literature and suggesting possible solutions; discussing stereotypes in the classics and methods of dealing with it; discussing education as the solution to sexual inequality; and de-stereotyping fairy tales that are sexist. The book presents conclusions and techniques used in group discussions on sexual stereotypes. (RB)

A CHILD'S RIGHT TO EQUAL READING

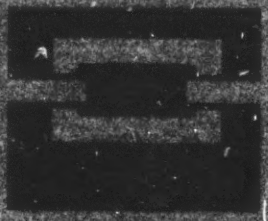


exercises in the liberation of children's books from the limitations of sexual stereotypes

A National Education Association Publication

A CHILD'S RIGHT TO EQUAL READING

Verna Hildyard



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Most of us Americans believe in equality. We think that everyone is entitled to a good education, that every man deserves as much chance as the next fellow.

Does a girl growing up in America deserve as much chance as the proverbial next fellow? The evidence indicates that the educational opportunities available to her are not equal to those a boy receives.

But suppose she did get a fair chance. Suppose that we practiced the equal-opportunity-in-education we preach, and applied it to females as well as to males. What would that mean for American schools, American libraries, and American children?

Now that many of us are deeply concerned about the damage sexual stereotyping does to our children, it is time to focus our imaginations on the prospects for sexual equality in school. If the world were freed of these stereotypes, what would daily routines in the classroom be like? What would teachers teach? How would children learn? What would children's books look like once they were liberated from the limitations of sexist bias?

What follows is a sequence of exercises in envisioning equality in children's reading: one possible plan for an introductory session of a community workshop on children's books.

A few American communities have already begun organizing such workshops—with parents, teachers, administrators, and librarians—to investigate the ways in which sexual stereotypes in books affect their children. Many similar projects will be underway in the coming year.

Perhaps individuals in your school system will also want to get together to examine sexual stereotypes in your children's books. If the following "exercises" are useful to you, feel free to adapt them to your own needs as you develop your own approach to the problem.

The purpose of this introductory unit is to examine the patterns of sexual stereotyping in children's books and the ways in which they reinforce inequality; to consider possible benefits and anticipate problems involved in change; and to speculate on the possibility of an alternative children's literature supportive of sexual equality in education.

What will you need?

A collection of American picture books selected at random from a school or public library (several for each member of the group); if possible a few foreign picture books for children and several American comic books (include *Superman* and *Wonder Woman);* also, *I'm Like Me,* by Siv Widerberg (The Feminist Press, 1972).

Did you want to be equal when you grew up?

At the start of the first session, the premise of this workshop will be written on the board:

> All girls and boys are created equal . . .

When the members of the group were girls and boys, what did they "want to be" when they grew up? If they had been born boys rather than girls (or girls instead of boys), what would they have wanted to be? What, in fact, did they "become"?

Discuss children's anticipation of "sex-appropriate" roles and the ways in which they acquired these expectations. Have the reading materials available to children (then and now) encouraged only the conventional roles, discouraging other options? Exactly what are those roles, and how do they limit human potential?

Do members of the group feel they deserved educational opportunities equal to those of their brothers (or sisters)? If so, were they actually offered the same chances? Discuss a few detail comparisons with siblings of the group. Do our children deserve the rights we feel we ourselves deserved and never got? Do children's books today afford that opportunity?

Which kinds of activities and feelings do books permit or prohibit for girls and boys? In the roles presented, are boys allowed to cry? Girls to be adventurous? Are boys as well as girls encouraged to care for younger children? May girls be physically strong, or exercise intellectual curiosity?

"Me feminine. You masculine. Right?"

On the board write a composite group list of "masculine" and "feminine" traits prescribed by traditional sex-role stereotypes. Then pass out a random collection of children's picture books (several to each person), and ask each member to deduct the books "messages" for girls and for boys: what is the difference in the codes of behavior suggested for the two sexes? If possible, a few American comic books and a few children's picture books from other countries should also be included in this collection; similar "clues" of sex-typing will probably be apparent in these as well.

How can everybody be typical? How many people do you know who are typical?

In the same books, ask the group to search for examples of roles and images *contrary* to the usual stereotypes.

How many fathers in the books wear aprons? How many mothers work outside the home? Are boys ever described as being especially sensitive to other people or especially "emotional"? Do any boys *dream* of getting married one day? Are there girls who want to be plumbers or architects? Does the author seem sympathetic to individuals in these "atypical" roles? Does he respect them?

Apparently the real world is richer and more variegated than almost all of these books would have our children believe. In this age and day, hardly any mommies wear aprons all day long; many, many mothers (about half of all American women) work *outside* the home; many women are not mothers at all; and of course many of the women who *are* mothers are not presently married. And there are multitudes of women interested in entering professions other than "typically female" ones.

As for men, probably far more than the books suggest do at least a part of the household work, and many spend at least some of their life caring for children. No doubt there are also large numbers of men who would welcome the chance to express emotion and to

make personal relationships more freely than the stereotyped roles permit.

All of these activities are valid and necessary and valuable human experiences that everyone should have a right and responsibility to share. We need books that will let our children know that these options are available. How can we help to create this new kind of literature?

First, by organizing parents, teachers, librarians, and school administrators in our own communities to work for change.

What are the objections we're liable to encounter in organizing our own communities?

Some of the most common hesitations on the part of local authorities will be reflected in fears that we may find surfacing in ourselves as we change our thinking about sex-role bias and the books children read.

Reading between the lines: boys will be boys, but what will girls be?

Many psychologists have documented the fact that children need adult role models—in literature as well as in life—in order to develop a stronger sense of self. From the evidence, it is clear that the shortage of strong and independent female characters in children's literature may in fact diminish girls' opportunities for an equal education. There are far many more biographies of men than of women now available, for instance (compare the listings in *Dick and Jane as Victims*, issued by Women on Words and Images). So it stands to reason that, by providing our children with fiction and nonfiction books featuring many more positive images of females, we will improve their chances for an equal education.

Strange as it may seem, librarians and childrens' book editors often object to this on the grounds that

> Girls will read books about boys, but boys will not read books about girls.
> Since boys have more reading difficulties than girls in the early years, they *need* this extra encouragement. . . .
>
> (Note: We live in a country in which 51% of the population is female; 49% male.)

Suggest some solutions to this curious dilemma. Some of the logical possibilities may be:

a. Eliminate all images of females from the books since girls are better readers and boys do not want to read about females.

b. Eliminate all images of males from the books since girls read better and, besides, they may not be interested in reading about males, given the choice.

c. Decrease both the amount of reading instruction for girls and the number of positive role models for boys.

d. Continue to publish books without many females in them; continue to persuade women that this is only fair.

e. Publish a new kind of book featuring representative numbers of females and males (with differences as well as similarities discussed). Teach all children to read these books. Offer remedial reading to any children who need it.

Discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of all these possibilities.

"It's liberated, but is it art?" Or, "It may be art, but who votes on what we call art?"

The right to an equal education implies the opportunity to read, among other things, some of the great classics of literature. However, a number of the children's books generally considered "great classics" are laden with sexual stereotypes prejudicial to girls—and to boys.

If a teacher is genuinely interested in providing all her students with a good education, how should she deal with this in an ordinary classroom situation? Consider the relative merits of the following options:

a. Go on using the "great children's classics" without regard to any possible sexual stereotypes: the very fact that they are "great works of art" means they are not biased.

b. Reexamine the children's classics for sexual stereotypes, and if you find any, censor those elements from the text when using the books in class.

c. Stop using the "classics" entirely if you find sexual stereotypes in them since a book that is biased cannot be a great work of art. Use only materials with egalitarian sex-role references.

d. First identify any sexual stereotypes in the classic in question; then consider the book in class as literature, discussing the particular significance of the au-

thor's bias and its effects on readers. Talk about what is meant by "a great work of art" (the question of universal appeal vs. intrinsic aesthetic value and also who determines each). Supplement your use of "biased classics" with other books that are relatively free of sexual stereotypes. Discuss the relevance of a "political consciousness" (in terms of the various ethnic and minority groups) in judging works of art.

Ask members of the group to apply their answers to the books their children—or pupils—are now reading. To what degree are the children conscious of the authors' attitudes about particular ethnic and minority groups, or about girls and boys?

Recognizing our roles: Are we like us?

It is difficult to imagine a world—or a book—that is totally free of sexual stereotypes. However, the very *consciousness* that those stereotypes present, limiting our vision, is an important step toward sexual equality.

A few children's books published in the past few years—in the United States and a few other countries—have begun to incorporate this kind of consciousness. One example is the writing of a Swedish author, Siv Wideberg, whose poems for children will be published soon by The Feminist Press. Some of these poems simply describe a child's awareness of physical difference from the opposite sex; others express the child's awareness, or dissatisfaction, with sex-role expectations.

Do the themes of these poems also relate to American experience? Which of the experiences discussed in the poems do you remember from your own childhood? Could any children you know identify with these? Does any possible "literary value" suffer from the presence of the "political" content? How would you have reacted if you had read them as a child?

Compare this material with that in American books recommended in *Little Miss Muffet Fights Back* (Feminists on Children's Media).

De-stereotyping our old sexist favorites: How to live less unhappily ever after with unfair fairy tales

Unless we want to discard most of the books in our libraries these days, we'll need to learn to live with some old favorite children's books, and learn to use them in new ways. Let's consider some classics for children: to begin with, Cinderella. What are the sexually-stereotyped elements in this story and how could they be "de-stereotyped"? If we were to revise this story, applying the new consciousness of sex-role stereotypes, how could we do it in such a way so that ultimately it would be supportive of sexual equality and would also work as a good story as well? Here are some sexually-stereotyped elements readers might point out in Cinderella:

a. She seems extraordinarily self-sacrificing and meek. Her living and working conditions are exceedingly harsh, yet she seldom complains and never gets angry. Actually, she takes hardly any initiative at all. Her general appearance is surprisingly attractive—considering the fact that she does so much housework. At the ball, she is content to dance with the prince the entire evening although the only thing he seems to appreciate about her is her good looks. She has been specifically warned to leave by midnight, yet she "forgets" and dashes off in a tizzy, losing one shoe. Finally, when the prince comes around and proposes marriage (as her foot fits the magic slipper), she accepts on the spot, after only one "date." (Cinderella is apparently under the impression that it is necessary to marry a man once a girl falls in love with him—if this is love.) On the basis of that first meeting, we are led to believe, Cinderella and and the prince live happily ever after.

b. Cinderella's stepmother is the stereotypical mean old stepmother.

c. Cinderella has a fairy godmother. (Why are all such benefactors fairy god*mothers*? How about a few fairy god*fathers?)*

d. Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters do not recognize her when she is dressed up at the ball. Can clothes *really* change one's appearance *that* much? Can't an attractive woman be attractive in simple clothes—and recognizable in fancy ones?

e. The prince evidently judges women primarily on the basis of shoe size and general appearance. Also, he seems somewhat ignorant about the dimensions of female feet: surely, Cinderella is not the *only* woman in the kingdom wearing that particular size shoe?

If we were to "de-stereotype" some of the elements of the story, they might sound like this:

a. Cinderella is a hard-working young woman with a good deal of self-pride. When the pressures

put upon her to complete her work become unreasonable, she makes her feelings known to her stepmother and sisters; if this doesn't bring results, she then grows frustrated, venting her anger at the source of her irritation. She takes initiative whenever it is in her own interest to do so. Cinderella is pleasing in appearance, but as she spends much of her time at household labor, her body bears the signs: dishpan hands and flat feet. At the ball, she is interested in meeting as many new and interesting people as she can, and during the evening she dances with many men. Since she knows that the coach will turn into a pumpkin if she doesn't leave before the stroke of twelve, she plans her exit well in advance: the prince was her favorite during the evening, so she bids him goodnight, deliberately yet discreetly leaving her shoe on the step where he will see it (ordinarily, she might simply have arranged a meeting, but this prince is hopelessly romantic). Finally, the prince pays his visit to propose marriage (he has no trouble finding her since she was wearing monogrammed shoes). Cinderella explains that she is flattered by his proposal and will certainly think it over: however, she would need to get to know him better before she made up her mind; on the other hand, she's been reconsidering her options . . . What's really the best way to live happily ever after?

b. In the new version, Cinderella's stepmother would be unstereotypical. She might try hard to understand Cinderella since she realizes her stepdaughter must be having problems adjusting to the new family and must miss her own mother.

c. Cinderella has a fairy godfather.

d. Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters recognize her at the ball.

e. The prince chooses his female friends not only on the basis of appearance but also considers intelligence, mutual interests, sense of humor, honesty, etc.

Now, using some of the "de-stereotyped" elements, recreate the Cinderella story (orally). Discuss the relevance of both versions. Then ask the group to select some favorite children's classics of their own and (1) identify the sexually-stereotyped elements; (2) "de-stereotype" them; (3) retell the story in a version free of sexual bias.

Notes on a Feminist Press Educational Project: Community Workshops on Children's Books. What we are doing. What we have learned.

During the fall of 1972 The Feminist Press began conducting community workshops on sexual stereotypes in children's books, with the assistance of a generous grant from the Rockefeller Family Fund. The initial recruitment and organizing efforts of these projects for parents, teachers, and librarians (in Westbury, N.Y., Baltimore, Md., and Holyoke, Mass.) are taking on the average about one to two months. The programs normally progress through three stages: 1. The identification of sex-role stereotypes; 2. The development of criteria for good children's books free of sexual stereotypes; 3. The selection of strategies for change and the creation of alternate materials. In the course of the workshop sessions, groups will collect and organize data on sexual stereotyping found in the books of local libraries and also produce a handbook on how to organize similar community workshops on children's books (this publication will be available in the spring of 1973).

In our experience in leading group discussions on the effects of sexual stereotypes, the following tentative conclusions have emerged. You may want to test them in your own community group:

I. In the initial sessions it is important for members to explore the effects of sexual bias on their own development. Once a personal commitment to equal opportunity in education is articulated, the group may have a better sense of basic standards for evaluating children's reading materials. (Do these books encourage both physical and intellectual growth on the part of both girls and boys?)

II. It is also useful to clarify, at the outset, the exact nature of traditional sex-role stereotypes. Have the group make lists of "masculine" and "feminine" traits and test these categories on children and adults they know.

III. Most people have at least some notion of the fallibility of these rigid categories and of the harmful effects of sexual stereotyping. Encourage that insight at every opportunity, and help to provide it with a foundation of data and logic.

IV. Use a variety of techniques to help members of the group heighten their sensitivity to sexual stereotypes. For instance:

a. Whenever possible, ask individuals to apply ideas under discussion to personal experience: how they have been affected by books they read as children, books they use in teaching, books used by their children, etc.?

b. Whenever generalizations are made about females and males, do a bit of reality testing: does the generalization hold true for people we know? Are there data available on the subject? How do such generalizations affect the education of children?

c. If any members of the group have difficulty understanding the function of stereotypes in some particular prejudicial context, illustrate the point by translating the implication in question to the opposite sex. For instance: "Most boys are troublemakers" = "Most girls are troublemakers," and ask the group if they find that statement acceptable.

d. Without calling attention to it, try liberating the English language a bit in your way of speaking. Instead of the conventional *"he"* for "one," *"man"* for people, *"men* and women" and *"boys* and girls," and *"his* or her," try including "Each child has *her* . . ." or *"People* in the Age of Enlightenment" or *"women* and men" and *"girls* and boys" or *"her* or his." Be natural about it, and whenever someone questions this usage, discuss sexual stereotypes in language.

V. Take as much time as you can to listen to the participants' own doubts and anxieties about sex-role stereotyping. What do they see as their problems, at home and at school? What are the practicable alternatives for them? In what way would your help be appreciated?

Some of these anxieties can be anticipated. A number of parents and teachers, for example, may realize the practical and political advantages of "integrated" sex roles but nevertheless feel anxious about the possible psychological consequences. For instance, parents may fear that if a little boy plays with dolls, he may "grow up to be a homosexual." (Curiously, such concerns about early sexual development appear to be focused on males.) In this situation, it may be useful to clarify the distinction between fantasy and overt action and between an adult's desires and a child's wishes through the various stages of sexual maturation. Also, try to establish for whom, under what conditions, and in what sense this is a "problem." If it is not conceived as a problem with girls ("tomboys" are "just going through a phase"), why does it present a problem with boys? Parents and teachers may appreciate the opportunity to "talk out" these concerns, and the talking itself may alleviate some of the anxiety since often the subject itself is taboo.

It may take an extra degree of honesty and courage to deal with this subject when it comes up. Most people are somewhat anxious about discussing homosexuality (or even the fear of it), and you may be, too. The best thing to do is to admit your anxieties at the start: others may be relieved to find they are not alone in their feelings and may then be prepared to speak more freely. On the other hand, suppressing the subject when it arises may simply serve to reinforce those fears and inhibit the discussions of sexual stereotypes.

VI. Sex-role stereotypes saturate our lives and stereotyped books are written and produced by people like you and me. At regular intervals throughout the sessions, take a minute to analyze any sex-stereotyped behavior that may have evolved in the workshop itself. Ask the group to "catch" you if you happen to slip and "correct" yourself without embarrassment: gentle humor may be the best method of pointing out implied bias of others you are hoping to influence.